

# SCHOOL CHOICE SURVEY IN THE STATE



#### **School Choice for Idaho:**

Many agree with the concept. Some disagree. And some simply want more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all Idaho children, it is critical to know the facts and to have a good understanding for public opinion.

This scientifically representative poll of 1,000 likely Idaho voters measures public opinion on a range of K-12 education issues including school choice.

## **Idaho's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice**

**Prepared By:  
Paul DiPerna**

**The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice**

**March 2008**

**This poll released jointly by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Agudath Israel of America, Black Alliance for Educational Options, Education Excellence Idaho, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Idaho Values Alliance, and The Center for Education Reform**

A MESSAGE FROM THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION:

## OUR CHALLENGE TO YOU

Our research adheres to the highest standards of scientific rigor. We know that one reason the school choice movement has achieved such great success is because the empirical evidence really does show that school choice works. More and more people are dropping their opposition to school choice as they become familiar with the large body of high-quality scientific studies that supports it. Having racked up a steady record of success through good science, why would we sabotage our credibility with junk science?

This is our answer to those who say we can't produce credible research because we aren't neutral about school choice. Some people think that good science can only be produced by researchers who have no opinions about the things they study. Like robots, these neutral researchers are supposed to carry out their analyses without actually thinking or caring about the subjects they study.

But what's the point of doing science in the first place if we're never allowed to come to any conclusions? Why would we want to stay neutral when some policies are solidly proven to work, and others are proven to fail?

That's why it's foolish to dismiss all the studies showing that school choice works on grounds that they were conducted by researchers who think that school choice works. If we take that approach, we would have to dismiss all the studies showing that smoking causes cancer, because all of them were conducted by researchers who think that smoking causes cancer. We would end up rejecting all science across the board.

The sensible approach is to accept studies that follow sound scientific methods, and reject those that don't. Science produces reliable empirical information, not because scientists are devoid of opinions and motives, but because the rigorous procedural rules of science prevent the researchers' opinions and motives from determining their results. If research adheres to scientific standards, its results can be relied upon no matter who conducted it. If not, then the biases of the researcher do become relevant, because lack of scientific rigor opens the door for those biases to affect the results.

So if you're skeptical about our research on school choice, this is our challenge to you: prove us wrong. Judge our work by scientific standards and see how it measures up. If you can find anything in our work that doesn't follow sound empirical methods, by all means say so. We welcome any and all scientific critique of our work. But if you can't find anything scientifically wrong with it, don't complain that our findings can't be true just because we're not neutral. That may make a good sound bite, but what lurks behind it is a flat rejection of science.

# **Idaho's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice**

**Prepared By:**

**Paul DiPerna**

**The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice**

**Poll taken by:**

**Strategic Vision, LLC**

**March 2008**

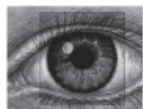
## About the Author



Paul DiPerna (paul@friedmanfoundation.org) is a director of partner services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization dedicated to educating the public on the issue of school choice. He joined the Friedman Foundation in September 2006. Before moving to Indianapolis, DiPerna served as assistant director for the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. His six years at Brookings included projects evaluating the federal Blue Ribbon Schools Program and analyzing student achievement in charter schools. DiPerna was a research analyst for the first five issues of the Brown Center Report on American Education (2000-2004), and he managed the activities of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education (2001-2005).

DiPerna is fascinated by the potential of the Internet, particularly in terms of discovering and coordinating information, mobilizing people, building social networks, improving organization and management, and communicating innovations. He has presented research at the American Sociological Association annual conference, and has published articles in *Education Next*, *First Monday*, the *Washington Examiner*, and the *Journal of Information Technology Impact*.

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Strategic Vision, LLC is an Atlanta-headquartered public relations and public affairs agency with a division that specializes in polling. Our team is knowledgeable about politics and current events throughout the nation and operates nationally on a variety of races and issue advocacy programs. Among the media that Strategic Vision's polls have been used by include FOX News Channel, *Newsweek*, *Bloomberg News*, *Time Magazine*, BBC, ABC News, Scripps Howard, the *Washington Times*, and *USA Today*. The company's polls have been cited as some of the most accurate by National Journal's Hotline.

## Acknowledgments

Several questions contained in this survey have been adapted from earlier survey research conducted by Terry Moe, Paul Teske, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The author is grateful for the insights their surveys have given us regarding public opinion and school choice.

Terry M. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School* (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).

Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Ohioans' Views on Education 2007* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007).

**The author of this report takes sole responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations.**

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## Executive Summary

This scientifically representative poll of 1,000 likely Idaho voters measures public opinion on K-12 education issues. It particularly examines the public's views and attitudes about school choice in the form of tax-credit scholarships, school vouchers and charter schools. The poll confirms that Idaho citizens clearly like the idea of freely choosing their schools.

There is demand for expanding school choice in Idaho. According to the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at Boise State University, approximately 6,900 students are on charter school waiting lists this school year. To seat those children, existing charter schools would have to expand their total capacity overnight by nearly 70 percent, or new charter schools would have to be authorized. The Center for Education Reform reports that there are currently 30 charter schools serving almost 10,000 students in Idaho—about 4 percent of the overall public school population.

Existing school waiting lists reinforce the general findings learned from this poll.

Idahoans would like to see transformation in their K-12 universe, so they can freely access a range of school options spanning regular public schools, private schools, charter schools, homeschooling and virtual schools. This poll's respondents, particularly 36-55 year-olds, seem very open to exploring a school choice system utilizing tax-credit scholarships.

Conducted January 18-20, 2008 by Strategic Vision, the poll has a margin of error plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Key findings include:

- **Nearly half of Idaho voters are not satisfied with the state's current public school system—47 percent rate Idaho's public school system as "poor" or "fair."** If we exclude the one out of five voters who are undecided, this proportion jumps to **59 percent**.
- **Two thirds of Idahoans do not see a need for more public school funding or higher public school teacher salaries.** Two out of every three likely voters (**66 percent**) say Idaho's level of public school funding is "about right" or "too high." Nearly the same number of respondents (**63 percent**) believes the average Idaho public school teacher salary is "about right" or "too high."
- **Only 12 percent of Idahoans say a regular public school is the top choice for their child's school.** Among 36 to 55 year-olds, who tend to be most emotionally and financially invested in K-12 schooling, this number bottoms out at **4 percent**. There is a disconnect between those in middle age groups and younger Idahoans (18 to 25 year-olds: **19 percent**; 26 to 35 year-olds: **17 percent**).
- **Idaho voters value private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling.** When asked "what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?", Idahoans prefer private schools (**39 percent**) over other types of schools. Charter schools (**25 percent**) are the second most desired option. About one out of five respondents (**21 percent**) would prefer to homeschool their child.
- **Idahoans like school choice reforms—67 percent express favorability to charter schools and 60 percent say they are favorable to school vouchers.** Among 36 to 55 year-olds, favorability jumps for school vouchers (**63 percent**) and charter schools (**72 percent**).



- **Idahoans favor a corporate tax-credit scholarship system.** When asked “if a proposal were made in Idaho to create a tax-credit scholarship system,” **57 percent** say they favor this policy. The middle age groups appear to be the strongest proponents—**62 percent** of 36 to 45 year-olds and **61 percent** for 46 to 55 year-olds.
- **Idaho voters also support a personal tax-credit scholarship system.** When asked “if such a proposal were made in Idaho, would you favor or oppose such an idea,” **59 percent** say the favor this policy. Support for special education scholarships increases to **67 percent** among 36 to 55 year-olds.
- **Over half of Idahoans (59 percent) cite “academic quality” or “school curriculum” as the main reason they would choose a particular type of school as the best type for their child.** This finding is consistent across all major demographic categories. Academic quality is the most frequent reason for all demographic subgroups spanning age, race/ethnic categories, gender and geographic region.
- **Idaho voters are more likely to vote for a state representative, state senator or governor who supports a tax-credit scholarship system—29 percent** saying “more likely” versus **19 percent** saying “less likely.” Among 36 to 55 year-olds, this potential voting gap widens to approximately **16 percentage points**.
- **Knowledge about school vouchers is at a low baseline in Idaho—there is an information deficit about this type of system reform.** Although a majority of Idaho’s likely voters (54 percent) have heard about “the use of school vouchers in K-12 education,” this is still a lower number when compared to some recently polled states like Nevada (**67 percent**) and Illinois (**62 percent**).
- **Knowledge about charter schools in Idaho is at a relatively higher baseline compared to other polled states.** More than three out of every five Idaho voters (62 percent) are either “very familiar” or “somewhat familiar” with charter schools. This is a much higher number than findings in either Nevada (**40 percent**) or Tennessee (**34 percent**).
- **Idaho school choice advocates have the opportunity to reach out to families and communities and inform them about school choice reforms.** Building local level relationships and networks, improving communications, and customized messaging are likely to be vital activities for Idaho school choice advocates in the future.

## Method

This survey provides a statistically valid representation of the views of likely Idaho voters. A total of 1,000 completed interviews were obtained. This provides statistical significance more than sufficient for decision-making purposes. The statistical margin of error at the conventional 95 percent confidence level is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

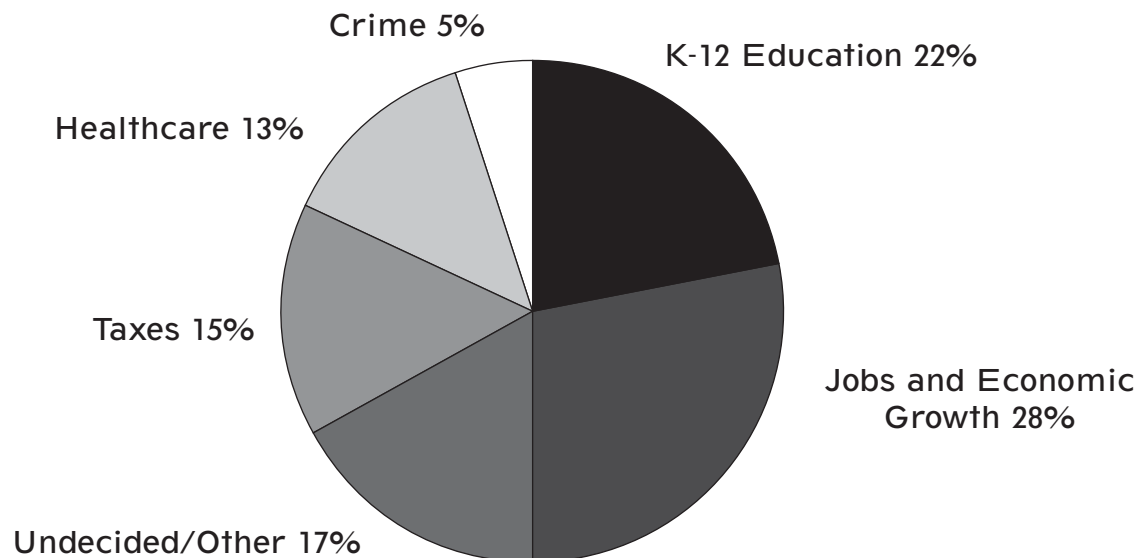
For this survey, the research firm Strategic Vision, conducted phone interviews of a random sample of registered Idaho voters from its call center. Interviews were conducted from January 18 to 20, 2008.

Respondents were asked whether they had voted in the 2006 election and were planning to vote in the next election in 2008. Respondents who satisfied both these criteria were classified as “likely voters” and were included in the survey. Respondents who either did not vote in 2006 or were not likely to vote in the next election were not included.

## Findings

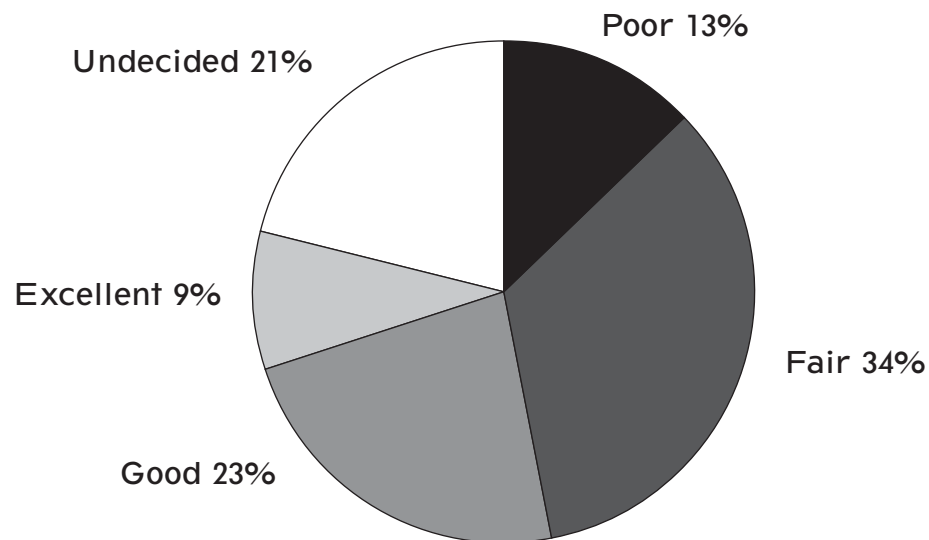
The following are the results of the survey.

1. I am going to name several issues facing the State of Idaho, and I would like you to select the one that is most important to you? \_\_\_\_\_

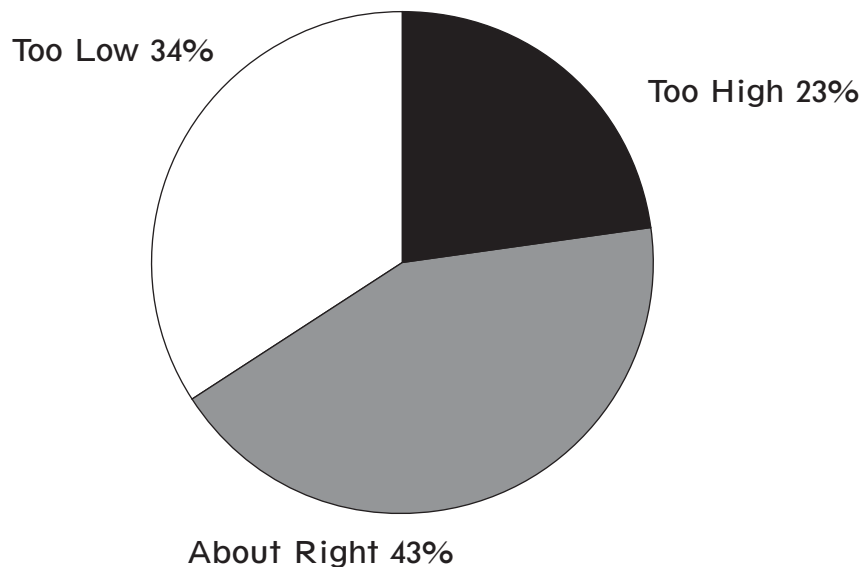


The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

2. How would you rate Idaho's public school system? \_\_\_\_\_

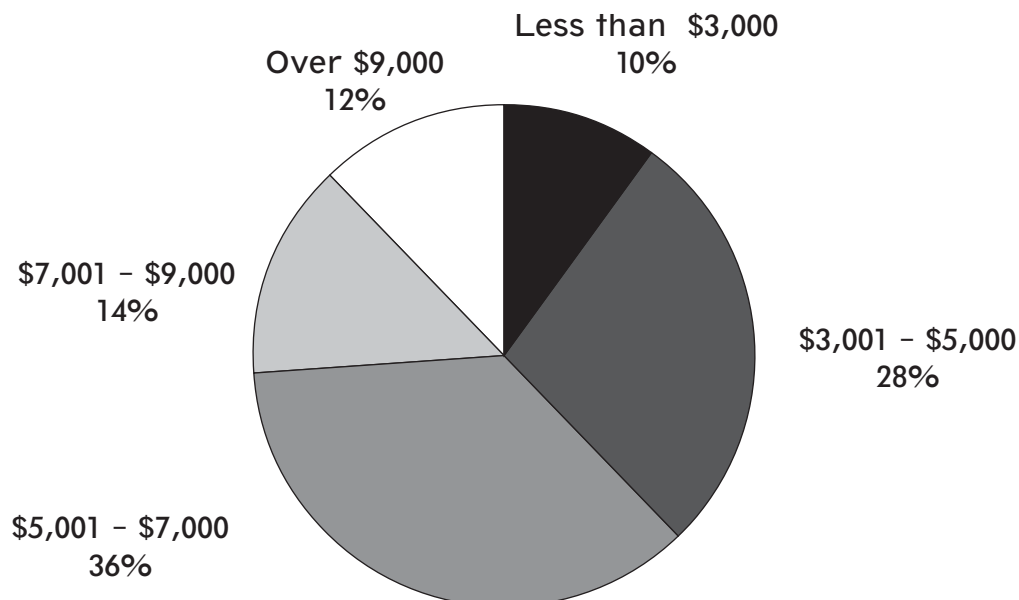


3. Do you believe that public school funding in Idaho is at a level that is: \_\_\_\_\_



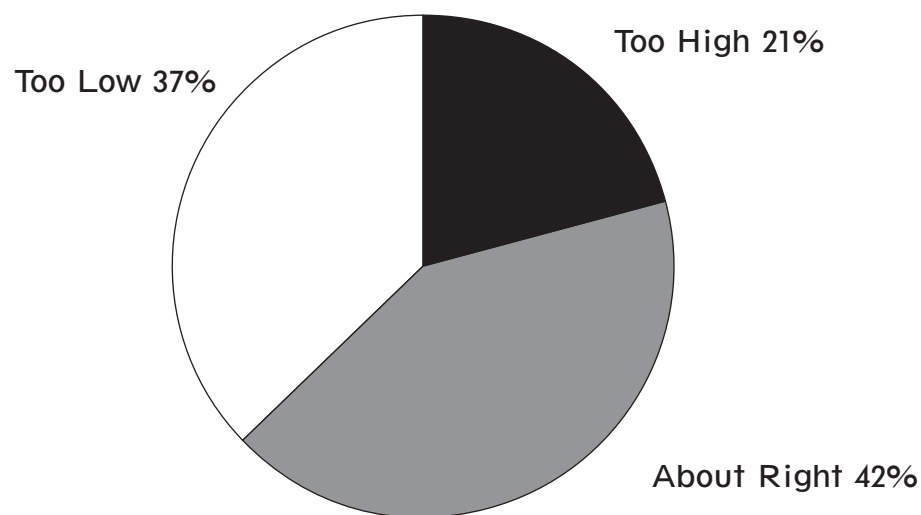
4. Approximately how much do you think the State of Idaho currently spends on each student in public schools?

Actual 2005 school year figure: \$7,204\*



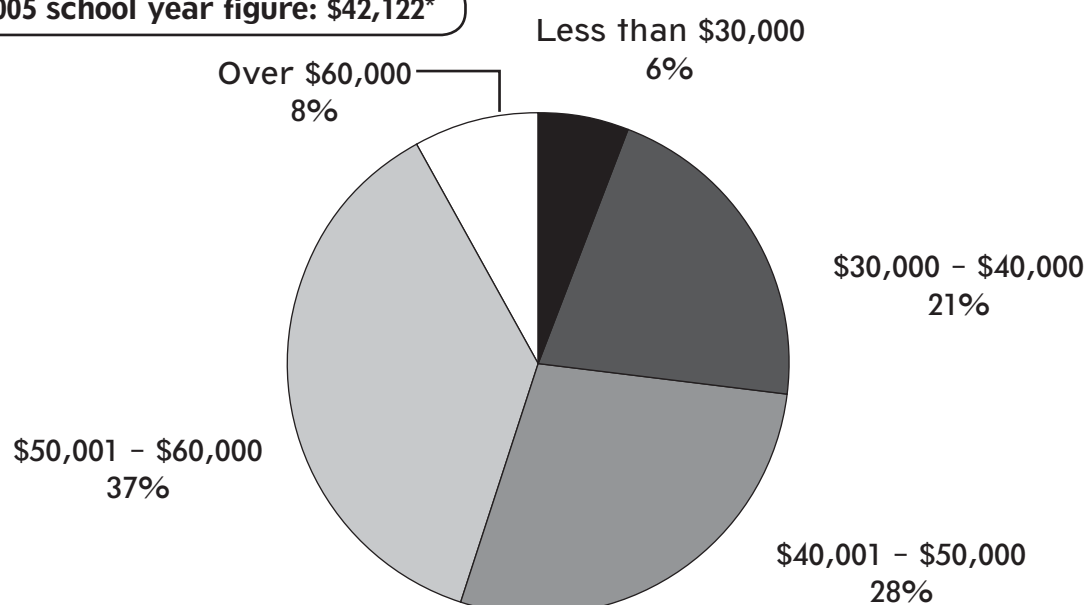
\*National Center for Education Statistics, "Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2004-05," published April 2007  
Calculated by dividing Idaho's total expenditures (Table 8) by Idaho's fall 2004 student membership (Table 3).

5. Do you believe that the average salary for Idaho public school teachers is: \_\_\_\_\_



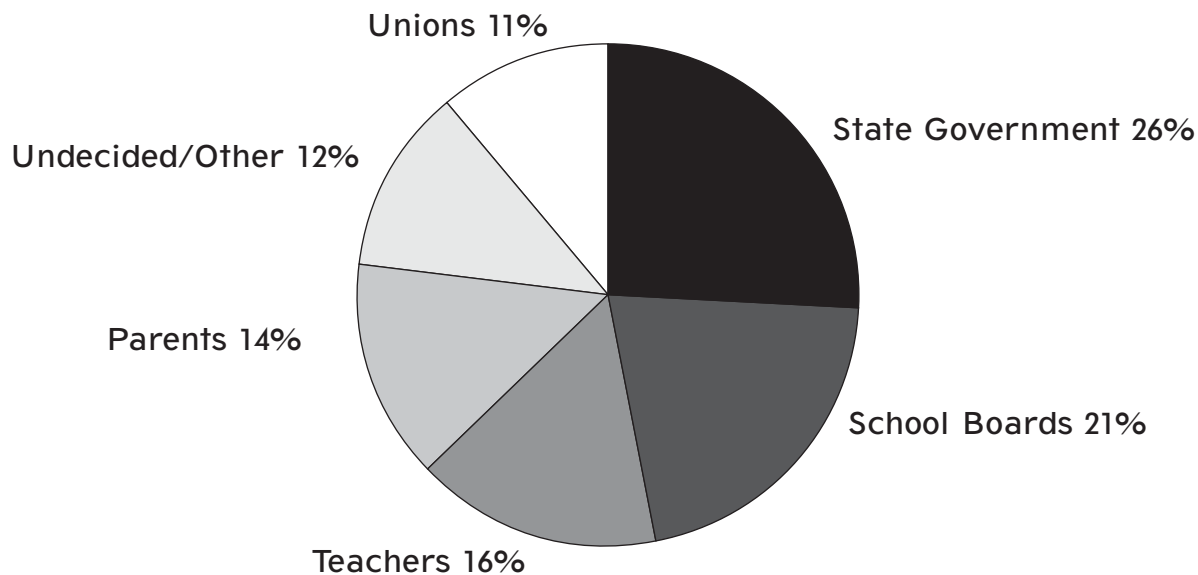
6. Approximately how much do you think is the average salary for Idaho public school teachers? \_\_\_\_\_

Actual 2005 school year figure: \$42,122\*



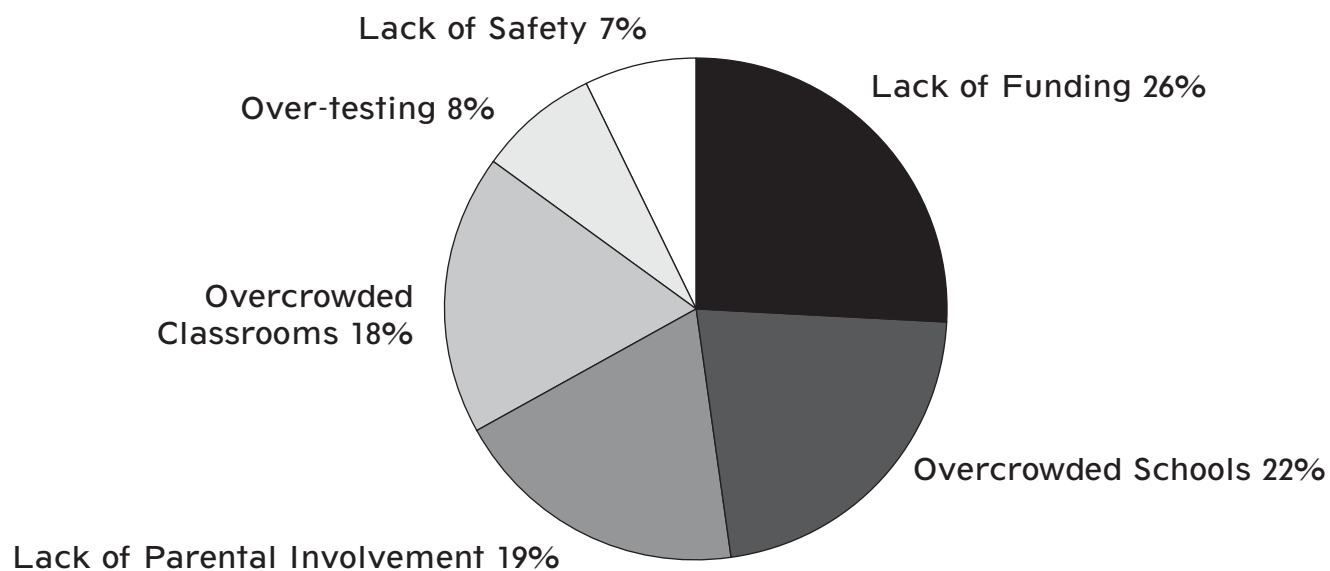
\*National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2006, published July 2007

7. Who is most responsible for the situation of Idaho's public school system? \_\_\_\_\_



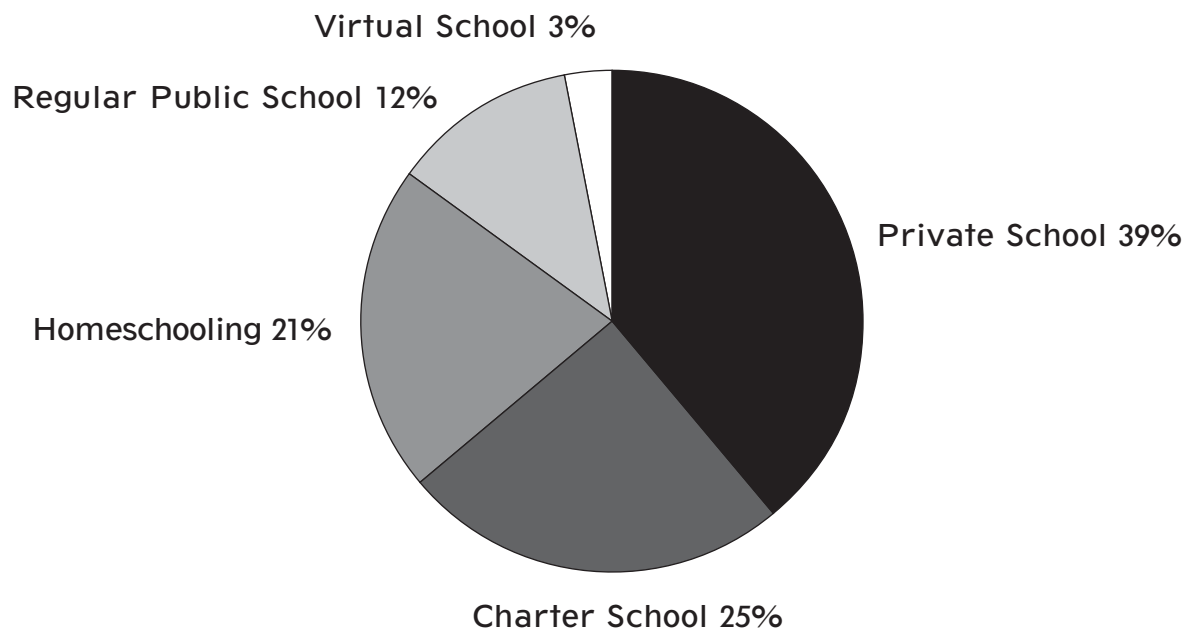
*The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.*

8. What do you see as the biggest challenge confronting Idaho's public school system? \_\_\_\_\_



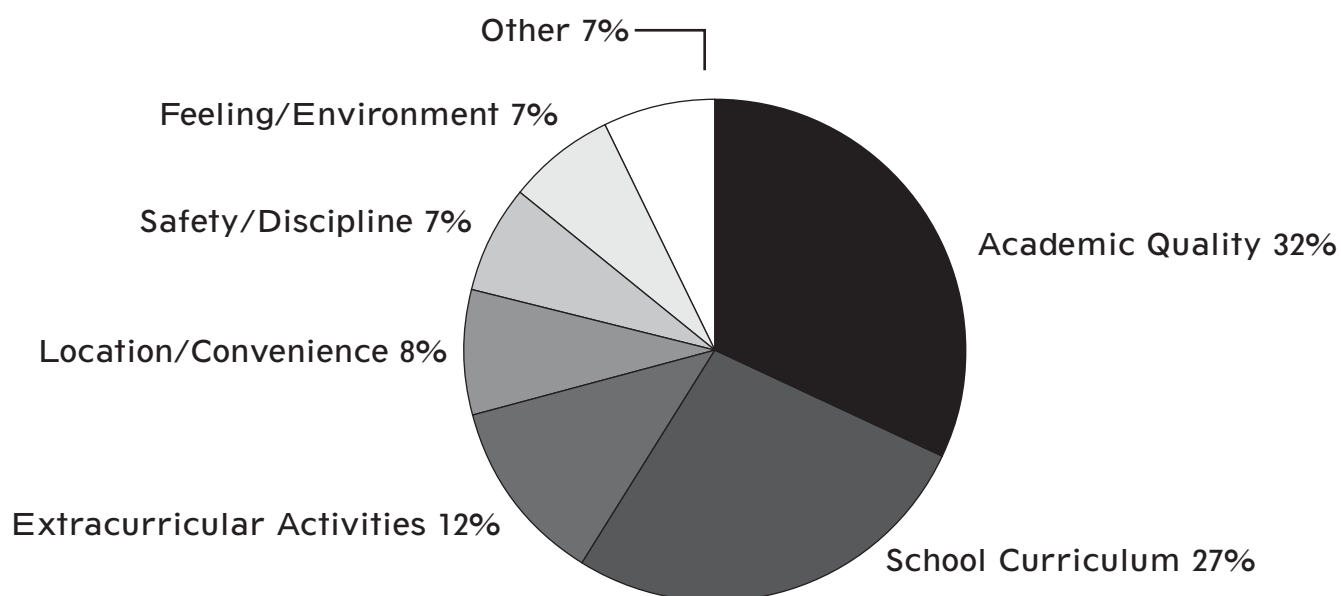
*The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.*

9. If it was your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child? \_\_\_\_\_



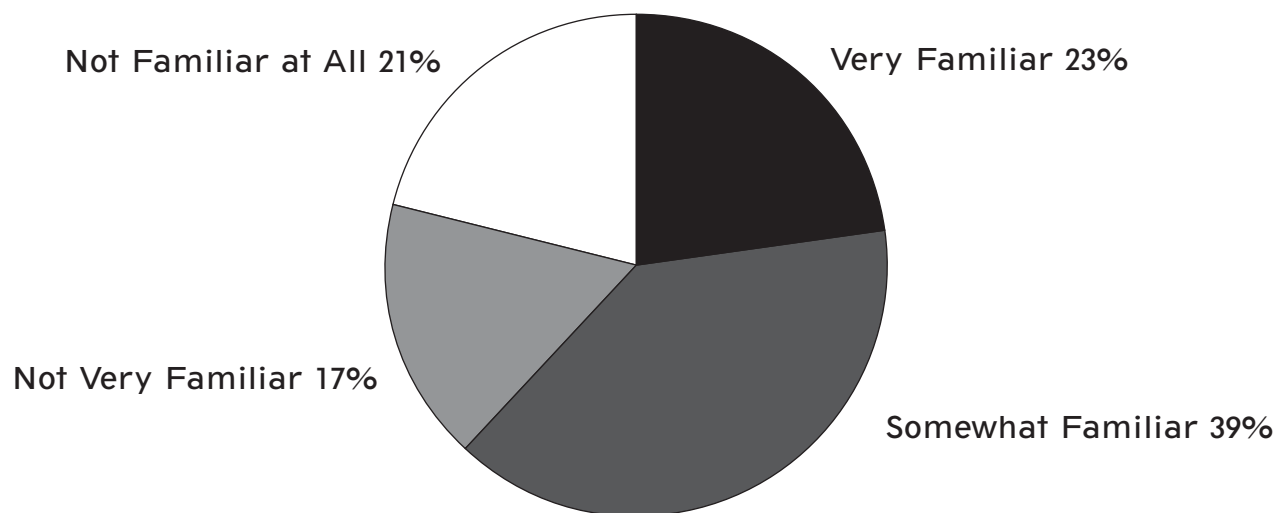
*The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.*

10. Why would you select [answer from question 9] for your child? \_\_\_\_\_

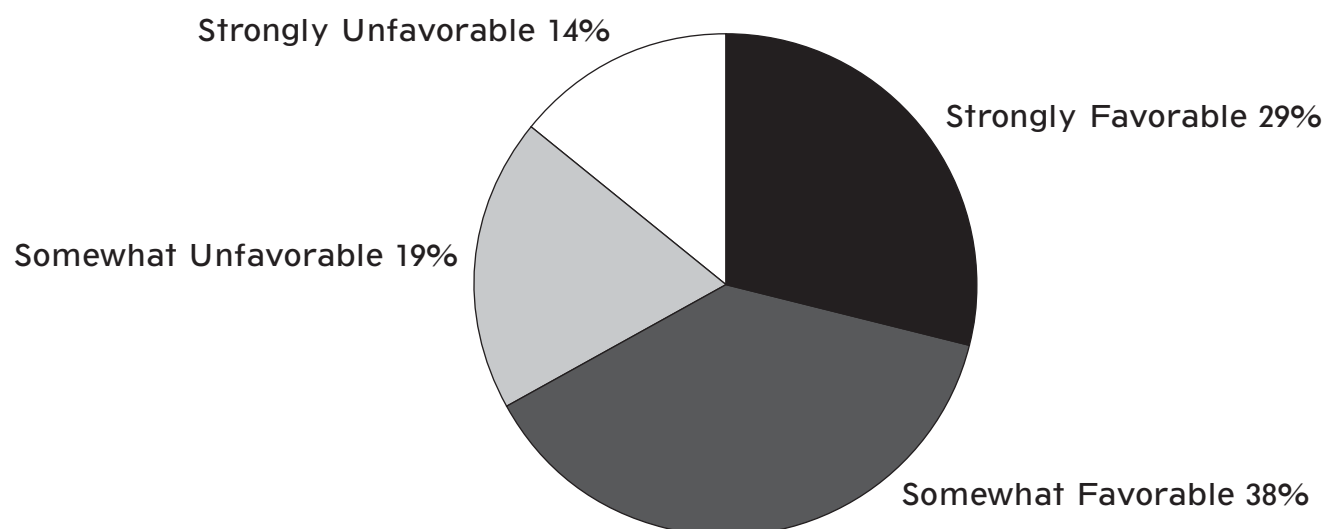


*The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.*

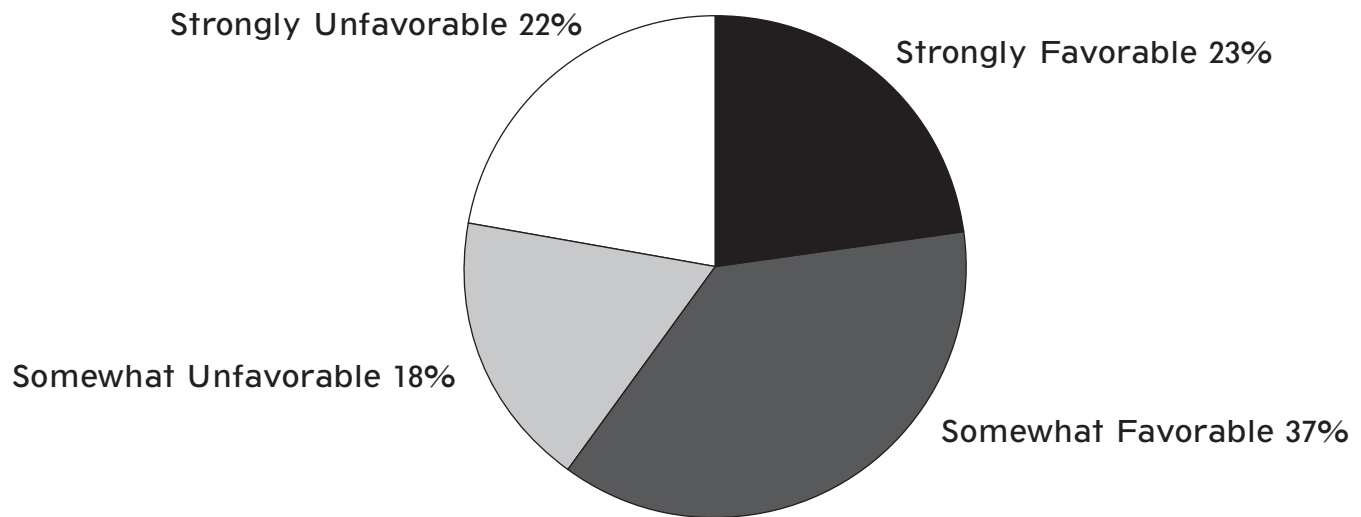
11. How familiar are you with charter schools in K-12 education? \_\_\_\_\_



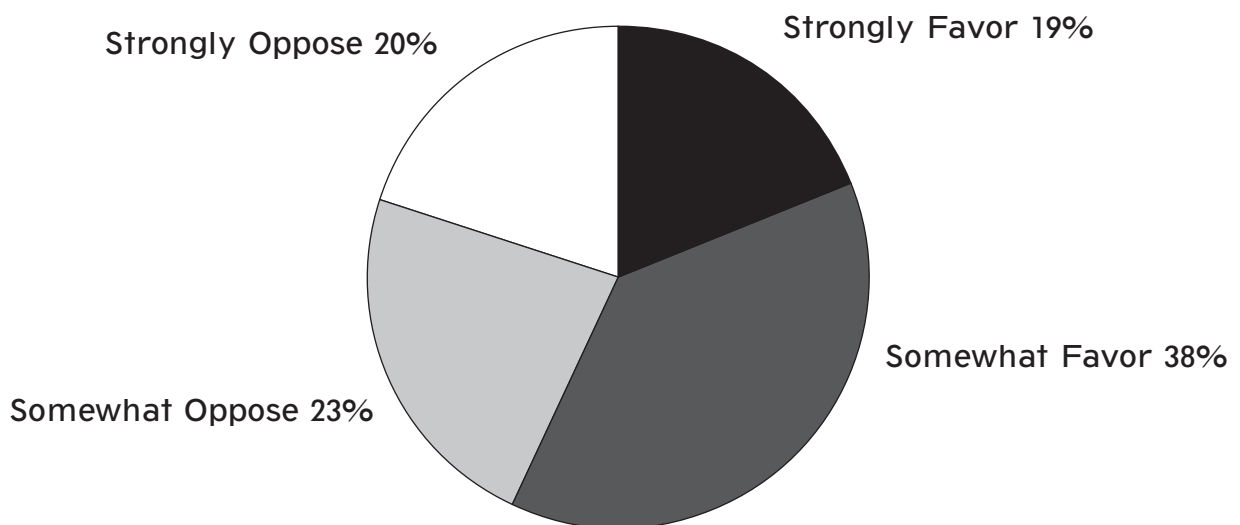
12. Charter schools are public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are free from many existing public school regulations. In general, do you favor or oppose this idea? \_\_\_\_\_



13. If a private school offered the best education for a particular child, would you favor allowing parents the option of using public funds to send their children to a private school? \_\_\_\_\_

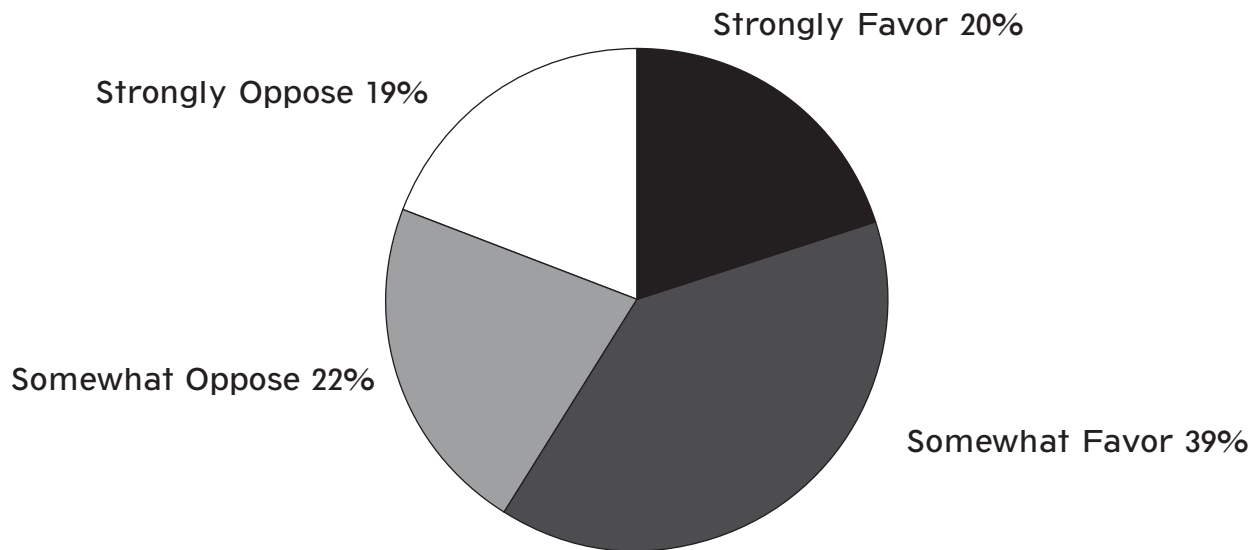


14. Some states give businesses a tax credit if they contribute money to fund private school scholarships. This policy is called a "tax-credit scholarship". If a proposal were made in Idaho to create a tax-credit scholarship system, would you favor or oppose such an idea? \_\_\_\_\_

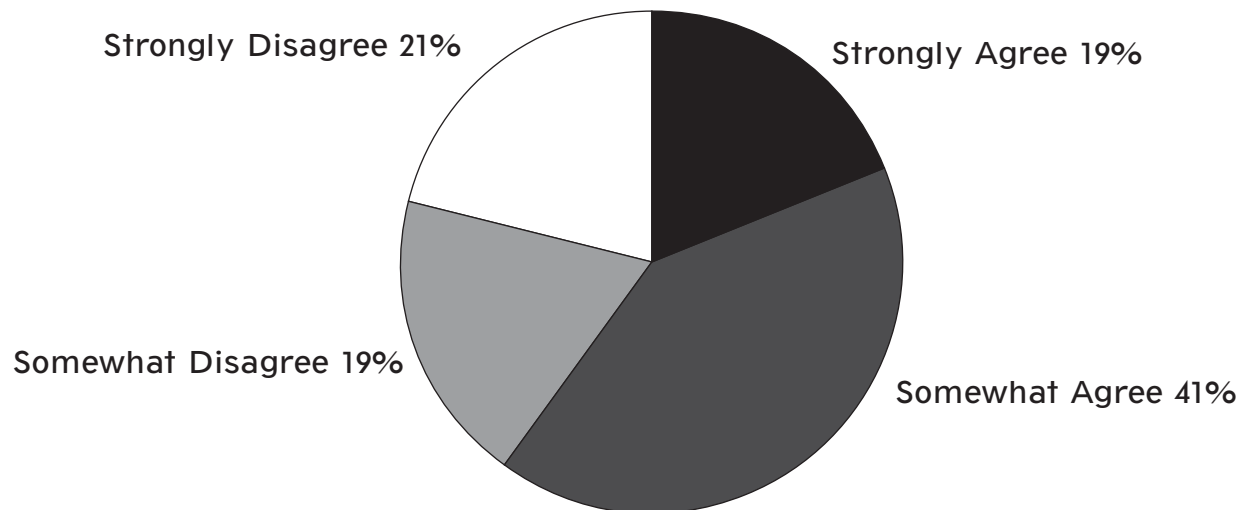




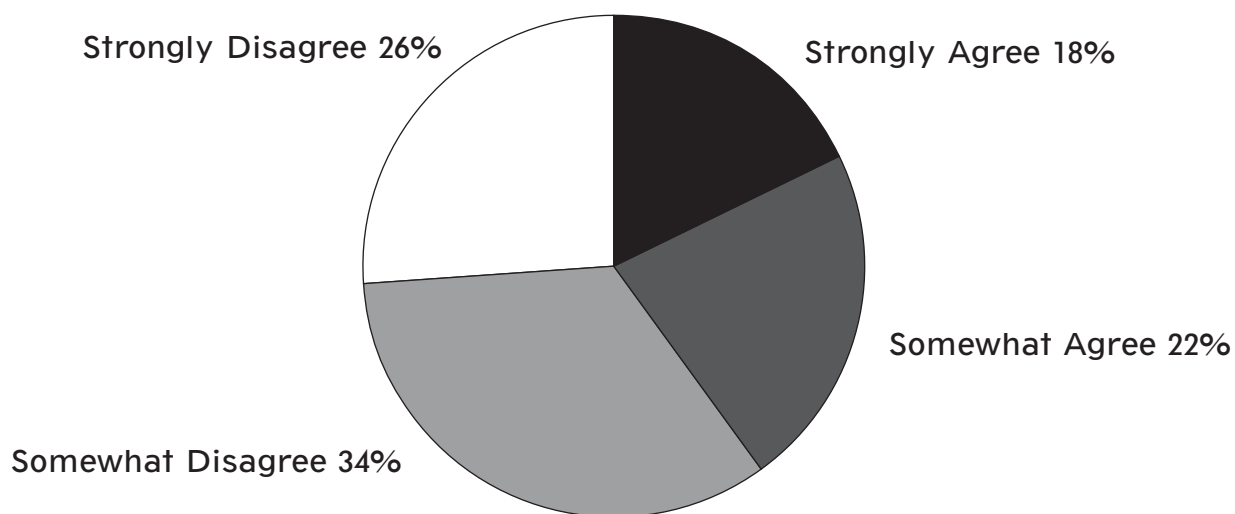
15. Some states have a different form of tax-credit scholarships, in which the scholarships are funded by contributions from individuals rather than businesses. If such a proposal were made in Idaho, would you favor or oppose such an idea? \_\_\_\_\_



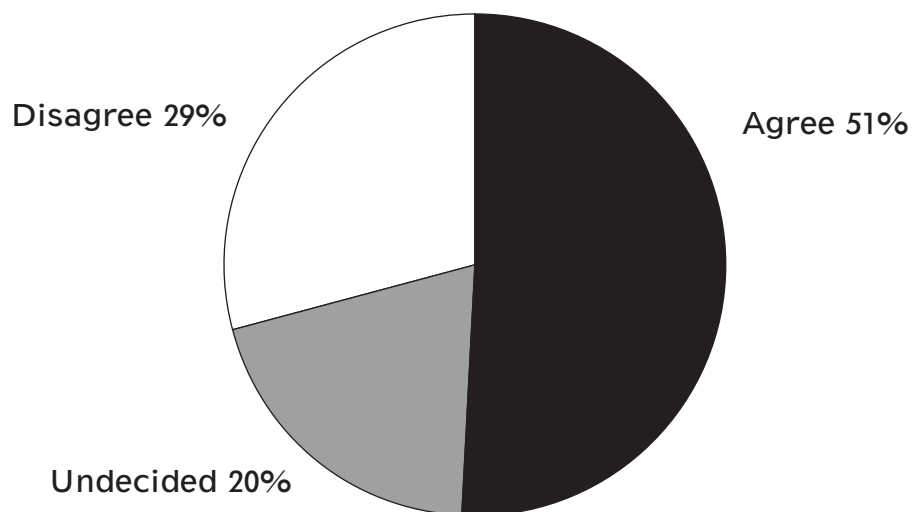
16. Some people believe that tax-credit scholarships should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



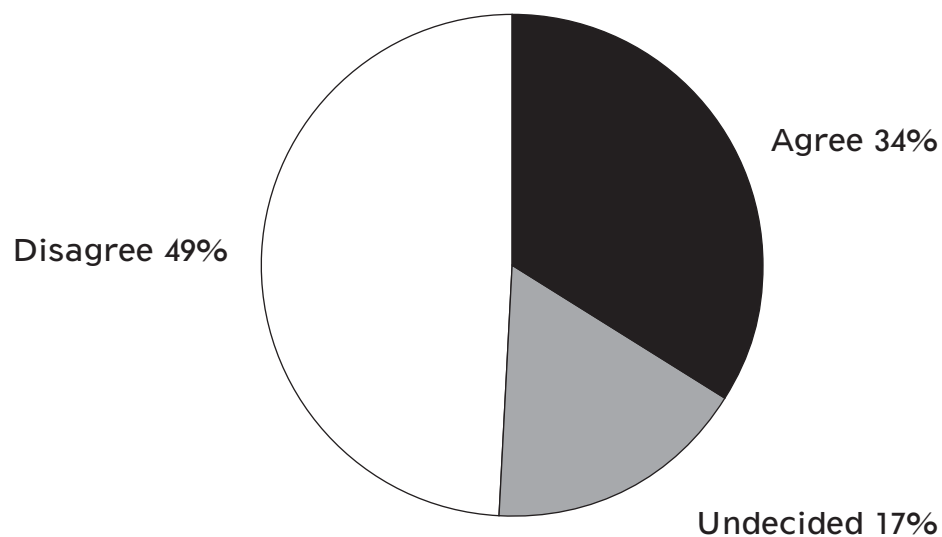
17. Some people believe that tax-credit scholarships should only be available to low-income families, to families with special education children, or to families with children in failing public schools. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



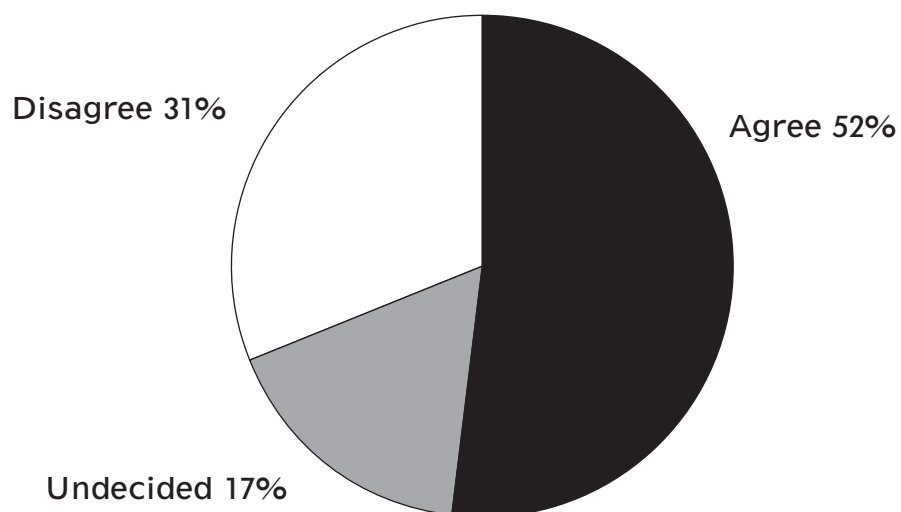
18. One argument in favor of tax-credit scholarship system is that it is good fiscal policy. School districts will save money, and potentially reduce local taxes, because participating students go to private schools, where per-pupil costs are normally less than regular public schools. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



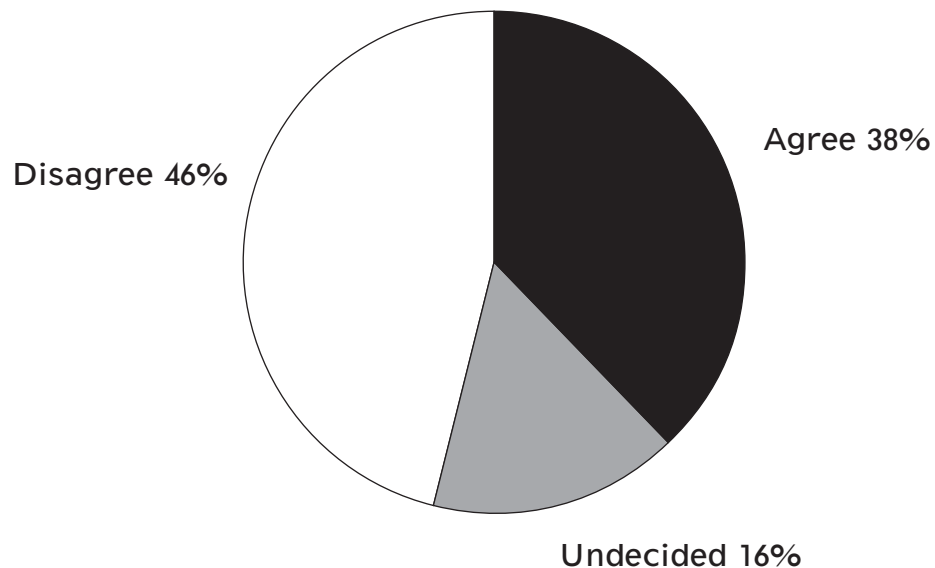
19. One argument against tax-credit scholarships is that they will make the public schools worse because they will be left with less money for operations. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



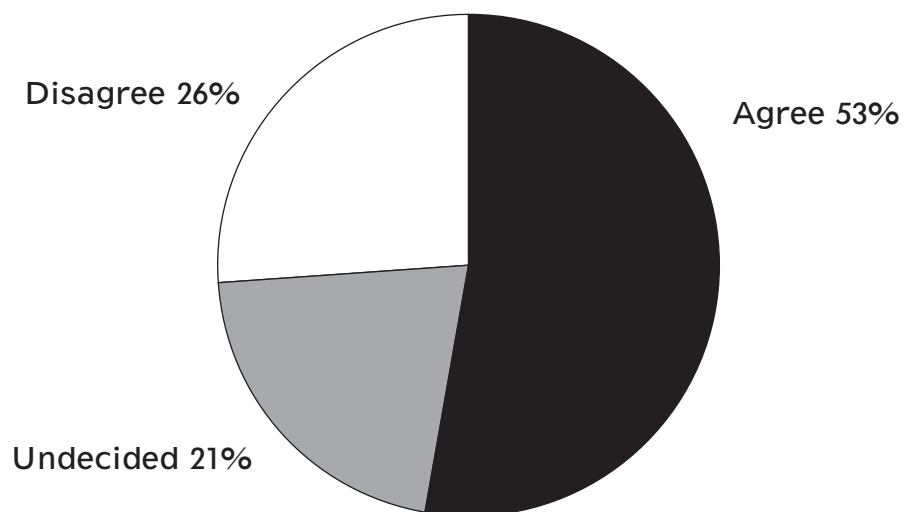
20. One argument in favor of tax-credit scholarships is that they are a lifeline for a child who can escape an ineffective, failing public school. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



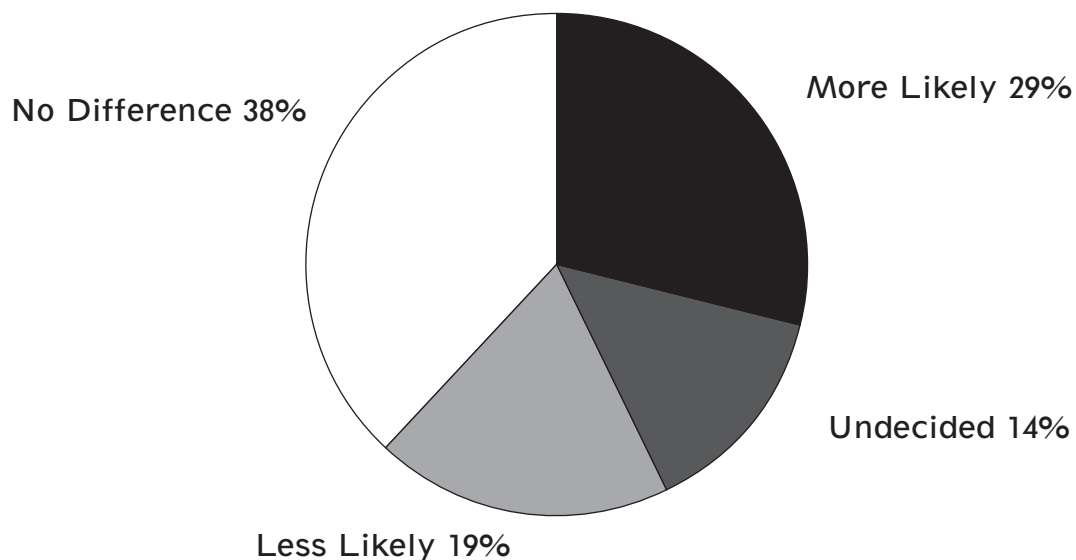
21. One argument against tax-credit scholarships is that they will help only a few kids and make things worse for students left behind in regular public schools. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



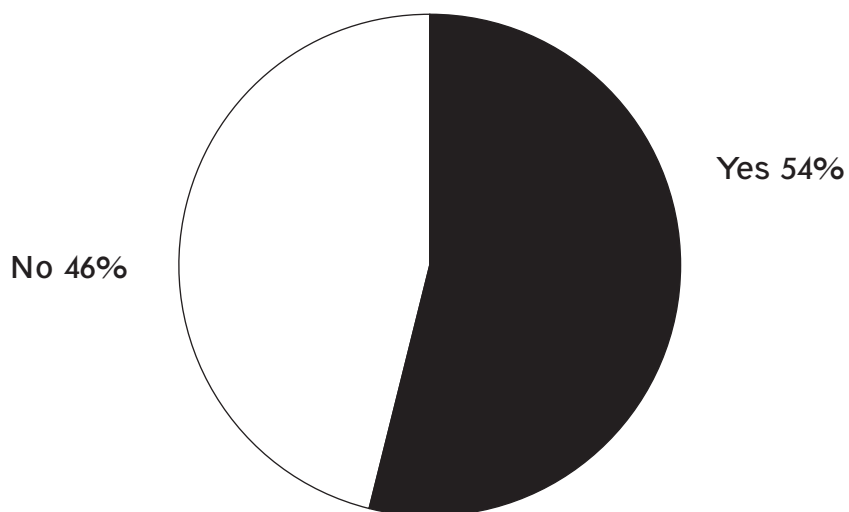
22. One argument in favor of a tax-credit scholarship system is that public schools and private schools will get better because they will have to compete with each other to hold onto students. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? \_\_\_\_\_



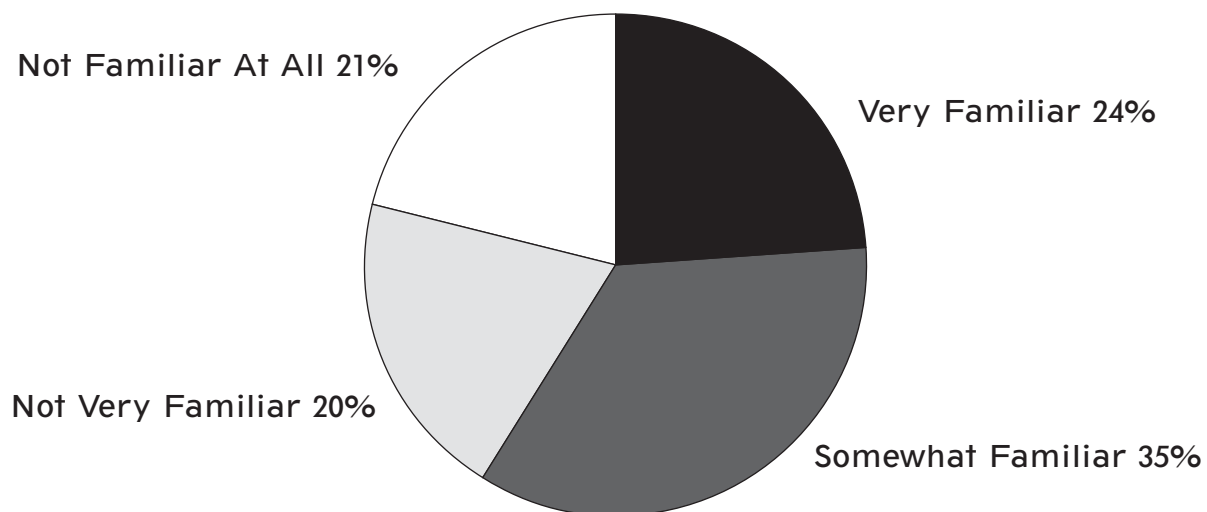
23. Thinking ahead to the next election, when a candidate for Governor, State Senator or Representative supports tax-credit scholarships, would that make you more likely to vote for them, less likely to vote for them, or make no difference whatsoever in your selection of candidates? \_\_\_\_\_



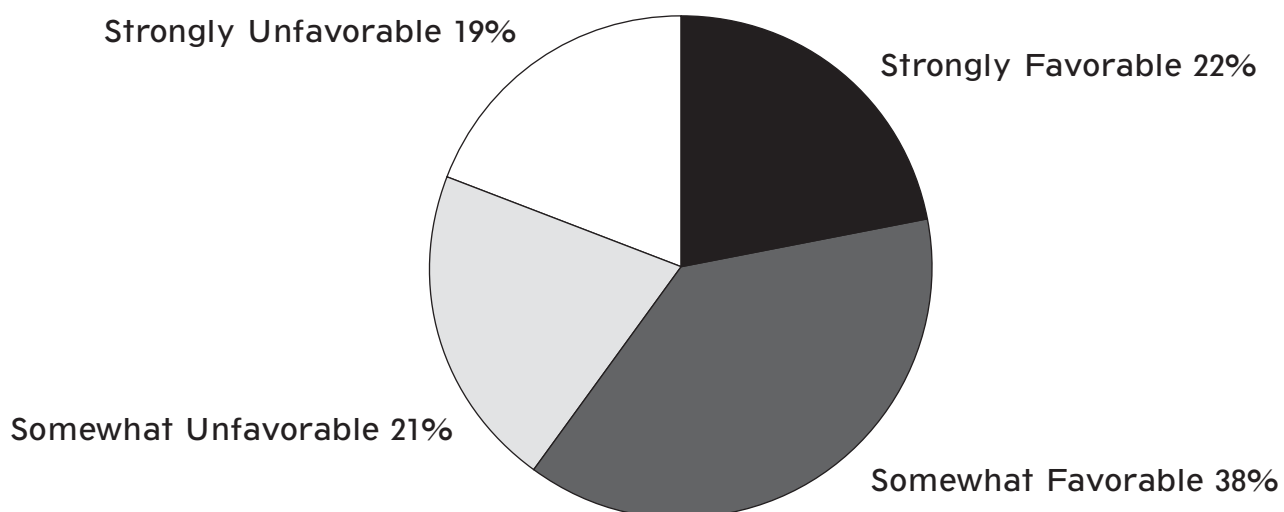
24. Have you heard anything about the use of school vouchers in K-12 education? \_\_\_\_\_



25. In Idaho there is a debate over the direction of K-12 education. Some people promote an approach that would allow parents the option of sending their children to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools. If this approach were adopted, tax dollars currently allocated to a school district would be allocated to parents in the form of a school voucher to help pay for the school where they choose to send their children. How familiar are you with this approach to education? \_\_\_\_\_



26. Based upon what you know about school vouchers, would you say that you are personally favorable or unfavorable towards this approach? \_\_\_\_\_



## Demographics

### ARE YOU CURRENTLY THE PARENT OR GUARDIAN OF ANY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN GRADES K- 12?

Yes	67%
No	32%
Don't Know	1%

### WHAT AGE GROUP DO YOUR CHILDREN FALL INTO? [IF "YES" TO PREVIOUS QUESTION]

Under 6	12%
6-10	32%
11-14	23%
15-18	18%
Combination	15%

### ARE YOU REGISTERED TO VOTE AS A:

Democrat	18%
Libertarian	3%
Republican	44%
Other Party affiliation	3%
Independent/No Party affiliation	32%

### IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AGE CATEGORIES DO YOU FALL?

18 - 25	9%
26 - 35	21%
36 - 45	30%
46 - 55	20%
56 - 65	8%
Over 65	12%

### IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES DOES YOUR TOTAL FAMILY INCOME FALL?

Under \$25,000	11%
\$25,000-\$49,999	22%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	39%
\$75,000 - \$150,000	18%
Over \$150,000	10%

### ARE YOU:

African-American	1%
Asian	1%
Hispanic	10%
White	86%
Other	2%

### ARE YOU:

Male	51%
Female	49%











The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice is a nonprofit organization established in 1996. The origins of the foundation lie in the Friedmans' long-standing concern about the serious deficiencies in America's elementary and secondary public schools. The best way to improve the quality of education, they believe, is to enable all parents with the freedom to choose the schools that their children attend. The Friedman Foundation builds upon this vision, clarifies its meaning to the public and amplifies the national call for true education reform through school choice.

**Dr. Milton Friedman, Founder**

Nobel Laureate and Founder of the Friedman Foundation

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